

Medicine in the Media: The Challenge of Reporting on Medical Research Hanover, New Hampshire

June 29–July 1, 2006

Agenda

Unless otherwise noted, all sessions will be at the Center for the Evaluative Clinical Sciences Classroom, MML Building, Dartmouth College Campus. With the exception of Mount Moosilauke, all sites on the Dartmouth College Campus are within easy walking distance to each other and the Hanover Inn (i.e., 15 minutes or less). However, shuttle bus service will be provided for those who want it.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28

6:00–9:00 p.m.	Welcome Reception at the Hanover Inn (light dinner, cash bar) A chance to meet faculty, other participants, and some local Dartmouth and VA researchers.
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THURSDAY, JUNE 29

7:30–8:00 a.m.	Welcome Breakfast
8:00–8:30 a.m.	Hosts' Opening Remarks <i>Barry Kramer</i> , Director, NIH Office of Medical Applications of Research <i>Michael Zubkoff</i> , Chairman, Community & Family Medicine, Dartmouth Medical School <i>Gary DeGasta</i> , Director, VA Medical Center, White River Junction, Vermont
8:30–9:00 a.m.	Orientation and a big picture look at medicine in the media This session will review the goals of the meeting, outline some common problems researchers see when they read stories about health in the media, and discuss ways to do better. <i>Steven Woloshin</i>
9:00–10:00 a.m.	How big? Numbers in research A major challenge for health journalists is understanding how big the main effect is in a given study. This session describes how health outcomes are counted and compared. The session will also provide a quick review of some basic terms used in health research and statistics. <i>Gil Welch</i>
10:00–10:15 a.m.	Break
10:15 a.m.– 12:30 p.m.	How sure? Basic research designs No matter how big the numbers are, you still need to decide whether to believe them or not. Perhaps the most basic question to ask is whether or not the numbers came from a true experiment. This session focuses on the basic distinction between randomized trials and observational studies. <i>Gil Welch</i>
12:30–1:30 p.m.	Lunch

THURSDAY, JUNE 29 (CONTINUED)

- 1:30–2:30 p.m.** **Using what you learned: Problems with numbers and some solutions**
Understanding the numbers is one thing, but communicating them to your readers is another. This example-based, interactive session will highlight how numbers can be misleading (or just confusing) and offer practical guidance on how to report them clearly. *Steven Woloshin*
- 2:30–3:30 p.m.** **Using what you learned: Highlighting cautions about observational studies**
Because some exposures are harmful, much research cannot involve randomized trials and must be done with observational studies. A major problem with observational studies is that it is hard to know the true cause of the observed difference. This session will deal with the problem of confounding and how researchers typically deal with it—multivariable adjustment. *Lisa Schwartz*
- 3:30–4:00 p.m.** **Break and leisurely walk to Baker Library**
- 4:00–5:30 p.m.** **Lab Sessions I (Baker Library)**
In these small group lab sessions held at Dartmouth’s Baker Library, participants will attend the first of two lab sessions that they have already selected (the second lab session will occur on Saturday, July 1).
Study design lab: Taking the researcher’s perspective—The presenter will engage the participants as a group in designing a clinical study to answer a health question of current general interest, such as “does cell phone use increase the incidence of brain cancer” or “does moderate alcohol use decrease heart disease?” The group will use the session to explore possible ways to get the evidence and the discuss limitations inherent in such an effort. *Mark Zweig*
PubMed lab—A computer lab (in which each participant has access to his or her own library computer) in which an experienced librarian teaches how to search the medical literature quickly and efficiently using the National Library of Medicine’s PubMed database. *Tom Mead*
National statistics lab—A computer lab (in which each participant has access to his or her own library computer) in which an experienced journalist and news editor introduces a variety of online data sources useful for finding reliable health statistics, and demonstrates tips for locating exactly what you need—quickly. *Kate Travis*
- 5:30–6:15 p.m.** **Break** (feel free to return to Hanover Inn)
- 6:15–9:00 p.m.** **Dinner & Discussion** (Dartmouth Outing Club, Occum Pond)
Special interest panel discussion: Dealing with editors
Each year journalists tell us they anticipate resistance from their editors when they try to put what they learn at Medicine in the Media into action (e.g., reporting more numbers, expressing skepticism, providing thorough context for new findings). This panel discussion, featuring seasoned health section editors and reporters, will help address some of these issues. *Julie Marquis, Craig Stoltz, and Liz Szabo*

FRIDAY, JUNE 30

7:30–8:00 a.m.	Breakfast <i>Note: Bring gear for outdoor activity to breakfast. You will not have time to return to hotel room prior to hike.</i>
8:00–9:00 a.m.	How sure? The limited role of statistics P values and 95% confidence intervals can be intimidating, but these are the basic measures that researchers use to express the role of chance and the precision of their findings. Being comfortable with these statistics can help journalists judge for themselves the value of study findings. In this session, these concepts will be explained clearly and concisely. <i>Gil Welch</i>
9:00–9:45 a.m.	Using what you learned: More cautions (even for randomized trials) Even with the best study designs, you need to understand basic study facts: what was measured, who participated in the study, and for how long. This session deals with the problems that arise in extrapolating from intermediate to clinical outcomes, from high- to lower-risk patients, and from short- to long-term results. <i>Lisa Schwartz</i>
9:45–10:30 a.m.	Special Topic: Disease mongering Healthcare providers and the public are under increasing pressure to accept expanded definitions of what constitutes disease. When this pressure does not serve patients' interests, it has been labeled disease mongering. The primary interest served is the financial well-being of pharmaceutical and device manufacturers who stand to gain from expanded markets. In this session, we review the case of "restless legs syndrome" to explore how the media can unwittingly facilitate this process. <i>Steven Woloshin</i>
10:30 a.m.	Bus to Mount Moosilauke
11:00 a.m.	Outdoor Activities at Mount Moosilauke (bagged lunch) In this session, journalists will be transported to the ravine lodge. Those who choose to will ascend Mount Moosilauke—a 4800-foot peak at the western extreme of the White Mountains. The hike is a vigorous 3.7-mile climb involving a 2500-foot vertical gain to the summit. The estimated time is 5–6 hours. Others may choose a less strenuous hike, a bird watching walk with a local naturalist, or just time to relax and enjoy the view from the historic lodge, built in 1938.
6:00–9:00 p.m.	Dinner & Discussion (Dartmouth's Mount Moosilauke Lodge) Dinner will be served in the lodge, followed by a lively discussion with two officials from the NIH: <i>John Burklow</i> , Associate Director for Communications, will discuss the NIH "Roadmap" and other initiatives. <i>Cathy Spong</i> , Chief of the Pregnancy and Perinatology Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, will share her perspective and insights on the issues surrounding cesarean delivery by maternal request.

SATURDAY, JULY 1

8:00–9:00 a.m.	Breakfast with Gary: Rating the media <i>Gary Schwitzer</i> , a former CNN reporter, will give a short talk about his efforts to rate health news coverage and publicly disseminate these results through his Web site—HealthNewsReview.org. This will be followed by a discussion which takes a critical look at such efforts.
9:00–10:30 a.m.	Special Topic: The logic of cancer screening This session provides tools for journalists to assess skeptically unqualified endorsements of cancer screening tests and to distinguish between strength of opinion and strength of evidence. <i>Barry Kramer</i>
10:30–10:45 a.m.	Break
10:45 a.m.–Noon	Too big? Two numbers to handle with care Journalists are frequently presented with two numbers that are prone to misinterpretations. One type is deceptively simple—5-year survival. The other sounds hard (and is): odds ratios. This session will provide guidance on how to understand these numbers. <i>Gil Welch and Steven Woloshin</i>
Noon–1:00 p.m.	Lunch discussion: The double-edged sword of anecdote Anecdotes can be dramatic and engaging, and add a personal, human aspect to reports on medical research and health. But researchers often worry that anecdotes are unrepresentative (and often misleading). This open discussion will seek to draw on both perspectives to address this tension and develop some principles to guide the use of anecdotes. <i>Liz Szabo and Barry Kramer</i>
1:00–1:15 p.m.	Break and walk to Baker Library
1:15–2:45 p.m.	Lab Sessions II (Baker Library)
2:45–3:00 p.m.	Break and walk to MML Building
3:00–4:00 p.m.	Garbage! When the news may not be fit to print The cautions about some study designs are formidable—so much so that journalists might reconsider covering them at all. This session will highlight stories that might have been best left on the cutting room floor—for example, preliminary results (e.g., scientific meetings, animal studies), uncontrolled studies, and cost-effectiveness models. <i>Steven Woloshin and Lisa Schwartz</i> Closing Comments, Barry Kramer